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AUTHOR Copeland, Gary A.; Slater, Dan
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ABSTRACT

Behavioral effects studies of mediated violence have traditionally focused on four paradigms: limited effects/reinforcement, instigation, imitation, and catharsis. The catharsis perspective suggests that the desire or need to exhibit aggressive or hostile behaviors is reduced by a release of those desires through vicarious or behavioral participation. Clearly those individuals unable to fantasize will have little or no catharsis, whereas those who have a higher ability to fantasize will be better able to engage in catharsis, thus reducing their overt aggression. Despite the importance of the fantasy ability both conceptually and methodologically, it is not measured in most media effects studies. Of primary importance for media researchers is the realization that catharsis will not function equally for all. Second, researchers must attempt to denote what types of mediated messages stimulate the greatest fantasy involvement on the part of the viewer. Third, exploration of the content of fantasies must be attempted. And fourth, fantasy may be a mediating variable between heavy media viewing and overt behavioral aggression. In summary, catharsis is a paradigm that too often is rejected due to public and private opinion that mediated violence must have some negative impact on viewers. A reformulation of the catharsis paradigm to include levels of fantasy ability, the type of mediated message that best triggers fantasies, and the content of the fantasies evoked could provide a resurgence of interest in catharsis as an effect of viewing mediated violence. (HOD)

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CATHARSIS AND FANTASY

by

Gary A. Copeland and Dan Slater

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Gary A. Copeland is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Speech Communication at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802

Dan Slater is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware 19711

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CATHARSIS AND FANTASY

Behavioral effects studies of mediated violence have traditionally focused on four paradigms: limited effects/reinforcement, instigation, imitation, and catharsis. Klapper (1960), a proponent of the first view, maintained that selective exposure and perception caused media messages to be reinforcing of previously held beliefs. Berkowitz (1965) has produced the exemplar instigation study suggesting that those individuals exposed to mediated violence are incited to act more aggressively than those not exposed. The classic imitation research conducted by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961, 1962a, 1962b) suggests that people will model the aggressive actions shown in filmed presentations.

Catharsis differs radically from all the previous paradigms. The general catharsis perspective suggests that the desire or need to exhibit aggressive or hostile behaviors is reduced by a release of those desires through vicarious or behavioral participation. Within the context of mediated violence, catharsis studies have focused on the hypothesis that involvement in vicarious aggression through fantasy leads to a reduction in subsequent overt aggression.

This paper is concerned with the relationship, if any, between catharsis and fantasy. We will first examine the relevant literature on catharsis and fantasy, then draw together the research for some tentative conclusions, and finally pose questions for further research.

Definition of Catharsis

Derived from the Greek katharsis --to cleanse or purify--catharsis was suggested by Aristotle in the Poetics (1951). Else (1957) summerized scholarly thought on the meaning of Aristotle's catharsis. Aristotle is purported to have believed that the viewing of tragedy induced a change of emotion or character in the audience. This purging was brought about through the emotions of pity and fear which were aroused in the viewer. Else notes that the purge is an emotional rather than a behavioral act. Similarly, Nicolas and Zax (1977) viewed catharsis from a psychoanalytical perspective as "a process that relieves tension and anxiety by expressing emotions" (p. 1).

One classic view of the catharsis process is the drive reduction/hydraulic model. This model has been analogized by Buss (1961) to a liquid held under pressure in a container. The liquid (feelings of anger, frustration, and/or aggression) are kept within the container (inhibitions). As more liquid (anger, frustration, and/or aggression) is added, more pressure is exerted against the container (inhibitions). When sufficient pressure is reached, drainage channels open to relieve the pressure. Drainage channels may be behavioral or vicarious. Drainage through vicarious channels reduces the pressure for a behavioral expression of the contained emotions. If vicarious expression of the aggression does not occur, then the container at some point will no longer be able to contain the pressure and an overt behavioral aggressive act will result.

Izard and Tomkins (1968) have suggested that aggression be viewed as an affect rather than a drive. They suggest people are not motivated

by drives, but rather by motivating forces. Tomkins (1963) has defined affect as a concept which includes neurophysical, behavioral, and phenomenological aspects. "At the phenomenological level, affect is essentially motivating experience. To activate an affect is to motivate" (p. 87).

Comstock et al. (1978) suggest two approaches to catharsis: the overt behavioral hypothesis and the vicarious behavior hypothesis. The former rests on the work of Dollard et al. (1939) who offer the definition that the "expression of any act of aggression is a catharsis that reduces the instigation to all other acts of aggression" (pp. 53-4). This view takes the position, in essence, that the ability to behaviorally engage in aggression will result in a catharsis, thus reducing the potential for other additional acts of aggression. Viewed from the second approach, the vicarious behavior perspective suggests that the viewing of mediated violence decreases overt violence on the part of the viewer through an emotional release.

Feshbach (1955, 1956, 1961, 1972), the leading researcher studying the relationship between the viewing of filmed aggression and subsequent reduction of aggression levels in the viewer, appears to combine aspects of both the overt behavior and vicarious behavior definitions. He defines catharsis as ". . . the expression of aggression—whether directly or in symbolic form—resulting in a lowering of subsequent aggression" (1961, p. 381). This definition is repeated almost two decades later (Murray and Feshbach, 1978).

But the vicarious behavior hypothesis is the more relevent of the two hypotheses outlined by Comstock et al., as it relates to the discussion of the possible effects of mediated violence. For the

purpose of this paper, catharsis is therefore defined as the use of media to create a reduction in behavioral aggression through the use of fantasy or other mental processes.

Fantasy, Aggression, and Catharsis

We agree with Comstock et al. (1978) that this vicarious behavior hypothesis, "involves a series of contigent relationships" (p. 243), but we do not agree with their conclusion that this complexity renders catharsis "a relatively improbable event" (p. 243). Rather, we concede the difficulty in measuring the variables and their suggested contigent relationships. We depart from the Comstock et al. position because it appears to be based on the results of research conducted within the catharsis-as-vicarious-behavior subset, research which as Murray and Feshbach admit, has "fared poorly" in experimental tests (1978, p. 463).

Clearly, the combined evidence for catharsis (Feshbach 1955, 1956, 1961, 1972; Feshbach and Singer, 1971; Manning and Taylor, 1975; Murdock, 1976; Siegel, 1956; Thomas, 1972) appears weak at best (c.f. Goranson, 1970; and Anderson, 1977). It is the contention of this paper that prior research in the vicarious behavior subset has "fared poorly" because it may be founded on an unsound formulation of how catharsis may function for the viewer in relation to fantasy activity. Further, it may be due to an underlying failure throughout the cited works on catharsis to control for the subject's ability to fantasize. The ability to engage in fantasy is posited as an intregal part of the cathartic experience.

Feshbach's original work with symbolic aggression and catharsis were couched in terms of fantasy stimulation and a subsequent reduction in aggression. This belief finds its roots in the work of Freud (1958)

who assumed that fantasy would release quantities of psychic energy which would be drive reducing. Clearly, those individuals unable to fantasize will have little or no catharsis, whereas those who have a higher fantasy ability will be better able to engage in catharsis reducing their overt aggression. Thomas (1972) notes that "while some of the discrepencies in the literature may be attributed to differences in experimental procedures or in the nature of the response measurement employed, it seems evident that differences in subject factors must also be involved."

The relationship between high fantasy ability and low aggression seems well established in the literature. Singer and Rowe (1962) used a suprise midterm exam to frustrate college students. Students who were given an opportunity to daydream after the test showed significantly less self-reported aggression than the group who was not allowed to daydream.

Pytkowicz, Wagner, and Sarason (1967) reported high daydreamers, when frustrated, reduced their hostility when compared to a low daydreamer group by daydreaming or writing stories based on TAT cards.

Singer (1968) angered black civil rights workers in the south by playing a recording of a speech given by a white racist. The workers were then able to listen to a humorous monologue—either neutral or aggressive—by Dick Gregory. Singer notes ". . . under appropriate conditions gratifying fantasy can have profound cathartic effects without in any manner altering external reality. . . ." He further concluded that fantasy can act as a mediator between anger and aggression providing the individual a third alternative to either aggression or suppression.

Townsend (1968) worked with institutionalized boys seven to twelve years of age who had been divided by staff social workers into high and low aggression groups. In the high aggression group, Townsend reported a lower fantasy ability as measured by Rorschach protocols than for the low aggression group.

Biblow (1973) divided fifth grade students into two groups of 30 high fantasizers and 30 low fantasizers based on the Holtzman Inkblot Test and the "Just-Suppose" tasks. Those with low fantasy ability increased their aggressive behavior following exposure to an aggressive film. Those with high fantasy ability demonstrated lower levels of aggression after exposure to a film—both violent and nonviolent—than the low fantasy group.

Loye, Gorney, and Steele (1979) conducted a field experiment with husbands who viewed various television program diets for a week. They reported the violence-viewing group who demonstrated low fantasy ability showed more hurtful behaviors—as reported by their wives—than those men in the same program group with high fantasy ability.

The mechanism by which fantasy may reduce overt aggression is unclear. Feshbach (1976) suggests five possible mechanisms which may operate in order to reduce aggression: substitute goal, expression valve, inverse action, positive reinforcement, and cognitive restructuring. Biblow (1973) and Singer (1971) maintain that affects—mood changes—rather than drive reduction is the best explanation for the observed data. They suggest that fantasy works as a method of mood altering or a distraction from the aggression provoking stimulus. Despite a clear understanding of the underlying mechanism, fantasy seems to provide a globular construct which reduces aggressive

responses in individuals.

A basis for a relationship between high fantasy ability and reduction of aggression seems to, therefore, exist in the literature. Intuitively—and conceptually—for a catharsis to occur the individual must have his/her fantasy ability engaged. If an individual is not involved in fantasy, the aggression reduction would be at a minimum or nonexistent. Despite the importance of the fantasy ability both conceptually and methodologically, it is not measured in most media effects studies.

Looked at from a different perspective the question might become, "Is television viewing and fantasy synonomous?" The first difficulty in attempting to answer this question would be to decide what precisely is meant by "television viewing." Usually TV viewing is treated as a variable, but Salomon and Cohen (1978) suggest that television viewing is a construct. Unlike variables, constructs are "based upon indirect evidence of their existence and their effects, the scientist has postulated their existence, or constructed them, in order to examine empirically some theoretical model" (Hiller and Nicholson, 1976, p. 112). Constructs are "not observational either directly or indirectly but may be applied and even defined on the basis of observables" (Kaplan, 1964, p. 55). It would seem propitious for researchers interested in testing vicarious catharsis to adopt a television viewing construct similar to Lindlof's (1980):

> television may be construed as a fantasy experience of a special order. The fantasy experience . . . is a characteristic cognitive <u>process</u> —not a product or a stimulus with self-styled fantastic properties. Certain stimuli may

> have fantasy-inducing potential, but . . . actual conversion of this potential is heavily dependent on the subjects' predisposition toward and prior experience with said stimuli (p. 278).

This construct is supportive of the argument that the fantasy is not in the program content but in the person.

This leads us to take exception with two common assumptions usually applied to the vicarious catharsis approach: (1) catharsis will take place for everyone equally and (2) cathartic fantasy will be violent in nature (Biblow, 1973). To assume all individuals could cathart equally despite differences in fantasy ability repeats the fundamental error made in early catharsis research. Differential effects should be expected based on differential fantasy and other personal attributes. Maccoby (1964) warns of assuming uniform impact of mediated messages on children. "The child is not a passive entity simply absorbing like a sponge whatever is offered to him. He is an active selector of what mass media materials he will expose himself to in the first place; and even during exposure . . . he displays attention selectively and what he remembers varies accordingly" (p. 327).

Given catharsis is claimed to function through the mediating influence of fantasy, expecting a person low in such ability to achieve the same levels of catharsis is counterintuitive. The lack of experimental control for varying fantasy abilities by early researchers may help to explain the inconclusive and contradictory results in this area.

This failure to recognize that fantasy is an ability within the person and not within an experimental manipulation is prevelent in the

communication and social-psychology literature. An exemplar of the fantasy-in-the-manipulation problem is illustrated in a study by Hokanson and Burgess (1962). They attempted to determine which type of aggression—physical, verbal, fantasy, or no aggression--would return systolic blood pressure and heart rates to prefrustration levels most rapidly. While a Duncan Multiple Range Test of the cell means in their 2 X 4 factorial design revealed no significant difference in the increase of systolic blood pressure between the frustrated and nonfrustrated in the verbal and physical aggression groups, both the frustrated fantasy and the frustrated no aggression groups show significantly higher readings than their nonfrustrated counterparts or with the physical and verbal aggression group. In a content analysis of responses to a TAT card shown to illicite moderate aggressive fantasy, they report no significant difference in the stories from those in the frustrated fantasy condition and the nonfrustrated fantasy conditions. This could be evidence that the use of fantasy was not significantly engaged during the experiment. Additionally, there was no control for high and low fantasy ability among the ten people in the frustrated fantasy cell.

The second argument that fantasy activity takes place while viewing only aggressive messages ignores an individual's ability to use mediated messages for their own personal needs. This criticism results from a confusion of the critical agent. The fantasy is not in the content of the message but in the mind of the user. A high fantasizer may be able to use any program content as a means towards overt aggression reduction. Researchers have typically assumed the content of the mediate message controls the content of the experienced fantasy. This

assumption is made in spite of the recognition of functionalism of media consumption (e.g., Merton, 1957; Wright, 1975) and the resultant research paradigm of the uses and gratification approach to media (c.f., Blumler & Katz 1974).

The uses and gratifications approach suggests that people use the media to fulfill their own needs. It is possible that high fantisizers may use any type of content material for a vicarious reduction in overt behavioral aggression. Klinger (1971) suggests that fantasy is created around an individual's current concerns, "unresolved current problems, unfinished tasks, role conflicts, and prominent affection responses, as well as the challenges of identity and commitment posed by the individual's social relationship" (p. 49). While Lindlof (1980) has suggested similarities between TV viewing and fantasy, as yet, there is no evidence to indicate the two are isomorphic. Similarly, there is a lack of evidence indicating the content or nature of people's fantasies while viewing television.

Some individuals may find it easier to engage in fantasy activity with a situation comedy than with an action adventure program. Biblow (1973) reported that high fantasy children could use either a violent or a nonviolent film to reduce aggressive behaviors after being frustrated.

There is some evidence that post-viewing fantasy is less violent for violent media content viewers versus prosocial media content viewers. Loye et al. (1979) report that exposure to violent program content reduced the violence in the expression of fantasies. Husbands in a violence-viewing diet differed significantly from a prosocial-viewing group by producing more "plus-imagery." Plus-imagery means a non-aggressive or nonhostile response to Baron's Ink Blot protocols as

determined by a content analysis. This difference between violence- and prosocial-viewing groups was found at the end of a week of a diet of violent or prosocial television programs. Evidence is available to support the contention that both violent and nonviolent media content may induce a cathartic experience.

Future Directions

Of primary importance for media researchers is the realization that catharsis will not function equally for all. Catharsis will occur only for those who (1) have fantasy ability and (2) have that ability engaged. Attempting to measure and control fantasy as an intervening or mediating variable is crucial to producing consistent and more generalizable results.

Second, researchers must attempt to denote what types of mediated messages stimulate the greatest fantasy involvement on the part of the viewer. Perhaps viewing mediated events only provides time for fantasy but plays no actual part in the fantasies. Exploration of mediated message content on fantasies is called for.

Third, exploration of the content of fantasies needs to be attempted. Will any type of fantasy reduce aggression or does the fantasy have to deal with the source of the frustration? What is the difference in fantasies stimulated by the media and fantasies stimulated by other agents?

Fourth, fantasy may be a mediating variable between heavy viewing and overt behavioral aggression. Singer and Singer (1981) note that children who are heavy viewers are less likely to be imaginative. Thus, it may be the lack of the fantasy ability rather than the TV viewing as the stronger predictor of aggressiveness in heavy TV users.

In summary, catharsis is a paradigm which too often is rejected due to public and private opinion that mediated violence must have some negative impact on viewers. A reformulation of the catharsis paradigm to include levels of fantasy ability, the type of mediated message which best triggers fantasies, and the content of the fantasies evoked could provide a resugence of interest in catharsis as an effect of viewing mediated violence.

Although under the traditional approach the research is far from offering strong support for catharsis, it is far from offering no support. Fruitful and more definitive results may be achieved if the reformulations of the vicarious catharsis paradigm suggested in this paper are operationalized.

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